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HISTORY OF THE DRAMATIC GENRES

INTRODUCTION

Ancient Greek drama comprises three principal genres: tragedy, satyr-drama and comedy.[1] These resemble each other in many ways, and were performed at the same festivals, but each had its own distinguishing features, which are so clear-cut that when a new papyrus fragment of a hitherto unknown dramatic text is discovered it is nearly always possible to assign it to its correct genre on the basis of language, metre and content. In what follows, therefore, it will be necessary to discuss both those features which the three genres shared (including the physical and institutional environments in which they were performed) and those which distinguished them from each other.

We can be sure that role-playing activities, perhaps of a ritual or semi-ritual nature, were part of Greek life, as they are part of the life of almost all peoples, from the earliest times; we know that choral dancing was familiar in Homer's world; and archaic art portrays many groups of costumed dancers, often fantastically garbed (e.g. as birds, satyrs, or horsemen complete with hobby-horses), often grotesquely padded. But we do not know how or where these performances metamorphosed into something that can truly be called *drama* – an enactment of a story (whether adapted from a familiar myth, or freely invented) in which each performer, or group of performers, represents (at any given time) a person or persons in the framework of the story, speaking or singing the words of a more or less fixed text. The origins of drama were already disputed in Aristotle's day. Our evidence suggests, however, that the crucial time

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1 We know of at least two other forms of dramatic performance that existed in the classical period – mime and *phlyax* drama – but no complete examples of these have survived.

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was the sixth century BC, and the crucial area a strip of territory extending roughly east and west from Attica, through Megara and the Isthmus, to Sicyon and Phlius in the north-eastern Peloponnese. According to Herodotus (5.67.2), 'tragic choruses' had once sung of the misfortunes of Adrastus at Sicyon, until the tyrant Cleisthenes (*fl.* 600–570) transferred them to the cult of Dionysus; Phlius, further inland, was the birthplace of Pratinas, the first great satyr-dramatist (who, to judge by changes in the iconography of satyric scenes in Attic art, may have moved to Athens around 520); Megara claimed to have originated both Athenian comedy (through the alleged founder of the genre, Susarion, traditionally dated *c.*570) and Sicilian comedy (through its colony of Megara Hyblaea, where Epicharmus was supposed to have been born *c.*550); while the founder of Athenian tragedy, Thespis, came from Icaria in eastern Attica, and is reported to have won the first official tragic competition at Athens *c.*533. Some of these traditions are based on shaky evidence, but their geographical coherence strongly suggests that this area did have a vital role in the origins of Greek drama, though very likely Corinth, long the cultural centre of the region (and the mother-city of Syracuse, where Epicharmus lived and worked as an adult), was more important in the process than the traditions indicate.[2] In Attica these early dramatic performances appear to have been particularly associated with the Dionysiac cult-centre of Icaria, and it may be significant that the east of Attica was the home territory and main power base of the tyrant Peisistratus under whose rule our sources place Thespis' activity.

It is only from the end of the sixth century that the history, as opposed to the prehistory, of Greek drama can be said to begin. When the records of the dramatic and dithyrambic contests at the Athenian City Dionysia were eventually published on stone, they seem to have been taken back to 501, perhaps because the festival was reorganized at that time to conform with the recent redivision of the citizen body into ten artificial 'tribes'; Aeschylus made his debut two or three years later, and the earliest tragedy whose date is known, Phrynichus' *Fall of Miletus*, was produced in 493. From then until the mid-third century Athens was the premier home of Greek drama. In the first generation, to be sure, Syracuse outshone Athens in comedy, but by 470 even Syracuse was importing Athenian dramatic talent, and as drama gradually became a leading form of art and entertainment throughout the Greek world it also became one of the prime

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2 Indeed a few Corinthian vase-paintings of the early sixth century do seem to show costumed and/or padded performers enacting, in comic rather than serious fashion,

roles in either mythical or fictitious stories.

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promoters of Athenian cultural prestige. At first this applied mainly to tragedy, because of the topical and parochial nature of most of the best fifth-century Athenian comedy; but as the nature of comedy changed in the fourth century its international popularity rose, and in the early Hellenistic period the by now ubiquitous touring companies of actors were as likely to be performing Menander as Euripides. By this time a theatre was almost an essential part of the civic infrastructure of a Greek *polis*, wherever it might be, and the dramatic arts were beginning to catch on among some of the 'barbarians' as well (at Rome the first tragedies and comedies on the Greek model were produced in 240). But by this time, also, the creative phase of drama in the Greek world was coming to an end. The last dramatist generally ranked in the highest class, Philemon, died at the age of ninety-nine *c*.263; competitions for new tragedies and comedies, at Athens and elsewhere, continued long after, but few if any of the plays that won them were performed or read by later generations. From the time of Augustus evidence for the production of new plays in the traditional genres becomes thin; there is a limited revival *c*.AD 125–175 – doubtless associated with the general renaissance of Greek culture in and after the reign of Hadrian – but after AD 200 the record goes dead until the reign of Julian (361–363), when (no doubt with official encouragement) comedies were put on stage in which Christians and Christianity were satirized, and, by way of response (to the emperor's great annoyance), one Apollinaris made the first of several abortive attempts to create a Christian tradition of tragedy and comedy on biblical themes.

By and large, from the mid-third century BC onwards, drama became for educated Greeks a treasured cultural possession from the glorious past to which they looked back with increasing nostalgia; it was still performed, but even more it was read, and made the subject of large-scale commentaries and intensive scholarly research. From the first, and increasingly, this activity was concentrated on three tragic dramatists – Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides – who had been singled out as classics at Athens as early as the fourth century BC, when official standard texts of their plays had been designated for archival preservation and public performance, and five comic dramatists – Epicharmus, Cratinus, Eupolis, Aristophanes, Menander. About AD 300 Epicharmus, Cratinus and Eupolis virtually disappear from the canon (though there is one papyrus of Eupolis from *c*.400), and knowledge of the other major fifth-century dramatists becomes more and more confined to a selection of plays

(seven each for Aeschylus and Sophocles, ten for Euripides, eleven for Aristophanes) which may have been favoured for school use. Menander does not seem to have been studied in schools, but remained popular

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with the adult reading public, at least in Egypt; the impressive Cairo codex, containing at least five plays, dates from the fifth century AD.

The eighth century saw an almost complete break in the study and copying of pagan Greek poetry in the Byzantine Empire. When interest revived in the middle of the ninth century, texts of Menander were no longer to be found; those of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes now began to be recopied, and all the plays included in the selections mentioned above, together with nine additional plays of Euripides preserved by a lucky chance from what had once been a complete edition in alphabetical order, survived the next six centuries to be included in the first printed editions, which appeared between 1494 and 1546.

As the revival of Greek learning in the West began to bring Greek drama back into educational curricula, attempts also began to be made to produce it; Aristophanes' *Wealth* was performed in German schools as early as 1521. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries more than one attempt was made to recreate an equivalent of Greek tragedy as a living, vernacular art-form. In Italy the so-called *Camerata Fiorentina* of the late sixteenth century, and following them Claudio Monteverdi, mistakenly supposing that the text of Greek tragedy was all sung, by one of the sublimest errors in the history of human culture created opera; in France, Corneille and especially Racine were as imaginatively flexible in their adaptation of Euripidean story material as they were rigid in maintaining the supposed Greek conventions of unity of time and place; in England the scholar-poet John Milton, thinking of drama primarily as a species of poetry, created in *Samson Agonistes* a form of tragedy-for-the-reader, complete with chorus, which found many imitators but produced no other great work. The direct impact of Greek drama on modern Western culture only became clearly perceptible about 1800, initially in Germany where a whole series of classic translations were published in the following few decades; then from about 1880 Greek tragedy, and subsequently comedy too, invaded the professional and amateur stage, which has been fascinated with it ever since, so that today Euripides, for example, is probably seen in any given year by more people than saw all the productions of his plays in Athens during his own lifetime.

FESTIVAL, THEATRE, PERFORMANCE

In classical Athens, every dramatic performance formed part of a religious festival held either by the state or by a local community; and our evidence strongly suggests that this was always and everywhere the normal pattern. This in no way proves that dramatic performances were thought of as

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'ritual' events, any more than were (say) athletic contests, which likewise were always part of a religious festival. What it does prove is that dramatic performances were *public* and *civic* events.

Modern dramatic performances (taking the term in a broad sense) are of two kinds. In one variety (film, video, television) the spectators are separated in space and time from the performers, and often also from each other; they are essentially passive consumers of a prepackaged product. Even in the other (live theatre in its various forms), where performers and spectators are in one place, the spectators are normally just a chance assemblage of ticket-buying individuals. Sometimes, to be sure, a production is closely associated with a particular subcommunity (e.g. a school, a church, a village) and involves all or most of its members either as performers, ancillaries or spectators; but theatrical events of that type are not normally considered to be of central importance either to the art of theatre or to society in general.

In classical Athens, on the other hand, dramatic performances were essentially and in principle events for the whole community. This indeed was one reason, even had there been no others, why they formed part of religious festivals. In the absence of adequate artificial lighting, performances had to be held by day, and religious festivals were the only days when non-leisured citizens could attend them. Not all Athenian citizens can have watched the performances, and probably not all cared to, particularly since (probably from the 440s on) they had to pay an entrance fee of 2 obols per person per day (at a time when 6 obols was a good daily wage for a family man). Nevertheless, even allowing for the presence of a large number of resident and visiting foreigners, and of boys under eighteen (but few slaves, and probably few women[3]), the theatre audience (of about 15,000) must always have included a substantial proportion of the Athenian citizen body – probably never less than 20 per cent, and often as much as 40 to 50; it is likely that in general more citizens would be present in the theatre than were present at the political

3 That some women attended the theatre is shown by passages in Plato's *Gorgias* (502b–d) and *Laws* (658a–d, 817b–c), and by one passage in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (lines 1050–1) where the chorus, pretending to offer the audience gifts of money, ask 'every man and woman' to let them know if they want some. On the other hand, none of the many other passages in comedy addressed to, or referring to, the audience makes any mention of the presence of women, and more than once in Aristophanes it is taken for granted that when a citizen goes to the theatre his wife stays at home. These apparently conflicting data can be reconciled on the assumption that while women were not officially barred from attending the performances, relatively few actually did so, and even fewer among those of citizen status.

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assemblies on the Pnyx a few days before or after. No wonder that in Old Comedy characters and chorus regularly address the audience as if it were identical with the Athenian people.

Many spectators, too, will have had experience of performing in the same theatre: the dramatic and dithyrambic choruses at the City Dionysia alone, in a peacetime year in the third quarter of the fifth century, comprised 665 men and 500 boys, all of citizen status, and on plausible assumptions about demography and behaviour it is not at all unlikely that a *majority* of the adult citizens who watched the performances in the Theatre of Dionysus had at some time taken part in them – quite apart from those whose fathers, brothers or sons had done so. Actors playing individual roles (and also musical accompanists) were professionals (and were not always Athenians), but these specialists numbered, for all the performances at the City Dionysia, no more than fifty-seven.

One must not suppose, however, that the theatre audience was a sober assemblage of the earnest and intelligent. Their average level of education may have been higher than that of the whole citizen body, but even the educated were on holiday – and a Dionysiac holiday at that – and they had numerous children and teenagers among them, which the assembly on the Pnyx did not. Indeed, in their numbers, their average age, their gender imbalance, their liking for alcoholic refreshment, their tendency to make unruly noises and sometimes to throw missiles at performers who displeased them, and the authorities' need to subject them to vigorous policing, the spectators at the Theatre of Dionysus are perhaps better compared with those at a present-day football stadium than with those at a present-day theatre or opera house.

The state festivals at which drama was produced were the City Dionysia and the Lenaea. The Lenaea, an ancient festival common to many Greek communities, was held in the month of Gamelion (January–February); the City (or Great) Dionysia, a more recent creation (very possibly instituted, or at least utterly transformed, by Peisistratus), began on the tenth

of Elaphebolion (March–April) and lasted four or five days. The Dionysia fell at the beginning of the good sailing season, and attracted many visitors from abroad; in the days of the Athenian Empire, its subject states sent delegations to the festival bringing their annual tribute payment, military contingents to serve in the year's campaigns if any, and a phallus to be carried in the festival procession. The Lenaea, by contrast, was attended almost exclusively by the resident population of Attica, citizen and non-citizen.

Both festivals were in honour of the god Dionysus, who always remained the god of drama *par excellence* throughout the Greek world (so that the international actors' guild of Hellenistic days was called the 'Artists of

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Dionysus'). His association with drama probably derived from older associations with masking and costume (as in satyric dances, and in the Attic myth of Erigone), and with competitions in song and dance (notably the dithyramb, a major musical/poetic form from at least the seventh century). Since masking, costume, song, dance and competition were essential features of all the dramatic genres, their Dionysiac character was guaranteed regardless of their subject-matter. Satyr-drama was Dionysiac in theme by its very nature, for satyrs were the servants or companions of Dionysus. Comedy's Dionysiac features were implicit in its name ('song of a band of drunken revellers'), and throughout its history it set great store by the joys of wine, the spirit of communal merrymaking, and the Dionysiac emblem of the phallus and all it represented; it was a very apt coinage when an unknown comic poet rechristened comedy *trugōidiā*, 'song of new wine', to emphasize both the kinship and the contrast between it and tragedy (*tragōidiā*). It was less obvious why the often bloody and sombre tales of tragedy should be enacted under Dionysus' auspices, and it became a catchphrase that tragedy was 'nothing to do with Dionysus'; attempts to explain the paradox continue.

At first official dramatic performances took place only at the City Dionysia, tragedy from *c.*533, satyr-drama from *c.*520, comedy from 486. In the time of Pericles, competitions were instituted at the Lenaea also, first in comedy (from about 442), then, about ten years later, in tragedy also. The tragic competition at the Lenaea never attained great importance, though Sophocles appears to have won it several times; the comic competition, on the other hand, was from the first almost equal in prestige to that at the City Dionysia – though there is some (disputed) evidence that comic dramatists who finished low in the Dionysia rankings in one year were, so to speak, 'relegated to the second division' and allowed to

produce only at the Lenaea (if at all) in the following year.

For all, or virtually all, the performances were *competitive* – like most exhibitions of artistry and prowess held on festival occasions in the Greek world. At the City Dionysia, from 486, there were two competitions, one in tragedy plus satyr-drama, the other in comedy. For each competition it was the responsibility of the magistrate in charge of the festival (the so-called eponymous archon) to choose the persons who would be allowed to compete, three for the tragic contest and five (perhaps sometimes reduced to three in wartime) for the comic; applicants were said to have 'asked for a chorus', and the successful ones were 'given a chorus'. Officially their role was that of *didaskalos*, 'trainer' of the chorus; in reality it was far wider. The *didaskalos*, as a rule, did far more than rehearse the chorus (and the actors) in their words, melodies and dances (and the piper in his accompaniment); he was also the poet and dramatist and composer and

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choreographer who had created them, the director who chose costumes, masks, properties and scenic effects, and blended everything together into a complete dramatic experience, and, in early days, the principal actor as well. From the 460s on, some specialization began to creep in. Sophocles early ceased to act in his own plays, others followed suit, and by about 450 acting had become a separate profession and there was a separate prize for the best tragic actor at the City Dionysia; later the routine work of choral rehearsal was often hived off to a *chorodidaskalos*, and in comedy, where the director's job was extremely demanding and required great precision in the planning and timing of movements and actions, it was common practice, especially in the late fifth century, for productions to be mounted by a two-man team, one partner writing the words, the other (the official *didaskalos*) taking most of the directorial responsibility. Aristophanes was particularly fond of this arrangement, and ten of his forty plays (including at least four of the eleven that survive) are known to have been directed by others. The *Fasti* record the name of the winning *didaskalos* whether or not he was the scriptwriter, but when reading-texts of plays went into circulation they normally bore the scriptwriter's name.

The financing of dramatic productions – like that of other important state activities such as the maintenance of warships – was effected mainly through a remarkable combination of sponsorship and taxation, the Athenian system of 'liturgies' (*leitourgiai*, 'public works'). The state provided the fixed equipment of the theatre, and paid fees to the *didaskaloi* and also to some or all of the actors taking individual parts; everything else was the responsibility of the rich man who had been designated by

the archon, or had volunteered to serve, as *choregos* (literally 'chorus leader'). His remit was to make sure that 'his' chorus was ready to compete on the day, and that all the equipment and training needed to make the production effective and impressive were duly provided. The role of *chorēgos* was an expensive one. A tragic *chorēgiā* in 410 cost 3,000 drachmae, and eight years later the same man spent 1,600 drachmae on a comic chorus: even the lesser sum was five times as much as a building worker could expect to earn in a year. Although conscription was sometimes necessary, there were many for whom the expense was well worth it, whether because of the chance of gaining the glory of victory, or because it was good for one's reputation to be seen to be giving munificently of one's resources for public benefit. The *chorēgiā* was abolished during the rule of Demetrius of Phalerum (317–307), and thereafter the funding of dramatic productions was the responsibility of a state official.

When the festival came, each comic chorus performed one comedy, while each tragic chorus performed (in the fifth century) three tragedies and one satyr-play (or, at the Lenaea, two tragedies). The contests were

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judged by a panel of ten, whose votes were very likely to be influenced (as many remarks in comedy indicate) by the perceived preferences of the audience as a whole.

The theatre itself was near the heart of the city, close up against the south face of the Acropolis in an area associated with some of Athens' oldest cults; when the audience of Aeschylus' *Persians* in 472 heard the ghost of Darius denounce his son for having destroyed Greek temples, the sacked Acropolis was just behind and above them.

In the fifth century the performing space was centred on the dance-floor (*orchēstrā*) which was normally occupied by the chorus. The shape of the fifth-century *orchēstrā* is disputed; in fourth-century theatres it was normally circular, but the evidence of early theatres in outlying parts of Attica and elsewhere, and some rather ambiguous traces in the Theatre of Dionysus itself, have led many scholars, since 1974, to believe that in the fifth century it was an elongated, shallow quadrilateral – though it is not clear how dithyrambic choruses of fifty, dancing in circular formation, could have performed in such a space. In the centre of the *orchēstrā* was an altar, later called the *thymelē*; sometimes in tragedy, less often in comedy, this is pressed into dramatic service as a focus of ritual activity or a place of refuge for suppliants, especially in the earlier plays of Aeschylus where it appears to be set on a mound definitely, though not very greatly, higher than the *orchēstrā* floor. Passages to right and left (called *eisodoi* in the fifth century, sometimes called *parodoi* by modern writers) served for the

entry and exit of chorus and characters; in Hellenistic times, and probably in Menander, the two directions had acquired conventional significances (audience's right = towards the city centre, audience's left = towards harbour or countryside), but even Menander never *relies* on such a convention to give his audience information not provided otherwise, and in the fifth century all we can reasonably assume is that where the contrast between two or more offstage locations was important to a play, the director would make sure that each *eisodos* was consistently associated with one of these locations.

In Aeschylus' earlier plays, down to *c.*463, there is no sign of any further scenic structures or equipment (except perhaps an underground passage beneath the *orchēstrā* to enable actors playing ghosts and similar apparitions to reach the altar-mound). By 458, however, in the *Oresteia*, we find that behind the *orchēstrā* there is a building. There may always have been some kind of booth (Greek *skēnē*) to serve as a rest-room for the actor(s) and a store for properties; now this booth, while retaining its original functions and also (as later evidence shows) its name, is enlarged, equipped with access to its roof (as at the beginning of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*), doors and (perhaps later) a window, and brought into dramatic use,

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normally representing the dwelling of one or more of the leading characters – palace, private house, army hut, temple, cave, according to what the play might require. Painted scenic decor (*skēnographiā*) is said to have been introduced about this time, probably in the form of panels hung on the front of the *skēnē* to help make clear the nature and location (urban, rural, seashore) of the dwelling it represented. The early *skēnē* may or may not have been on a platform raised above the level of the *orchēstrā* and approached by steps; if there was such a platform, the evidence of play-texts suggests that it was made appreciably higher *c.*418. In plays like Aristophanes' *Frogs* and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, both written in 406/5, access from *skēnē* to *orchēstrā* and vice versa nevertheless remained easy; but as the dramatic importance of both tragic and comic choruses dwindled in the fourth century, the segregation of actors' and choral space became virtually complete, and in many theatres the actors' platform, and the entrance to the *skēnē*, came to be as much as 3 or 4 metres above ground level (though some passages of New Comedy suggest that in Athens at least, interaction between characters and chorus was still thought of as possible in the early third century).

Associated with the *skēnē* were two special-effects devices. One, usually referred to as the *ekkyklēma* ('rolling-out'), was used primarily to display

indoor scenes to the audience, though in satyr-drama and comedy it could also serve a variety of other purposes; it probably consisted simply of a wheeled trolley which could be pushed (or sometimes pulled) out through the central door of the *skēnē*. It is used, for example, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* to display the tableau of Clytaemestra standing sword in hand over the corpses of Agamemnon (sprawled in a bathtub) and Cassandra; in Menander's *The Curmudgeon* (*Dyskolos*) to enable the audience, and the young lover Sostratus, to hear a conversation between Cnemon, ill in bed, and his stepson Gorgias; in Aristophanes' *Peace* to stage the rescue of the goddess Peace, hauled out of the 'deep cave' in which War has imprisoned her; and in his *Knights* merely as a convenient way to get an unwanted character offstage: 'Roll me within, ill-starred one that I am!' cries the discomfited Paphlagon in mock-tragic tones, the trolley is pushed out, and a moment later he collapses on it and it disappears into the *skēnē*.

The second special-effects device was the flying-machine (*mēchanē*), a crane (as used in building) whereby characters making airborne entries could be swung onstage – characters like Bellerophon on his winged horse, Perseus with his winged sandals, or the divinities (*dei ex machina*) who often intervene at the end of a tragedy to impose a solution and tell the characters their future fate. The earliest tragedy in which it is universally accepted that the *mēchanē* was used is Euripides' *Medea* (431), but there is good reason to believe that Euripides is playing on an existing *deus ex*

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machina convention, and there is evidence that Aeschylus used the *mēchanē* at least twice in his last years.

All forms of drama were performed by a troupe of the same basic structure:

1   *The chorus*, the essential and original nucleus of the performance. Although the signal for the commencement of a play was the herald's call to the *didaskalos*, 'Bring on your chorus', the chorus normally entered only after the play had been in progress for some time; in Hellenistic drama their entry marked the end of the first of the five acts (*merē*, 'parts') into which all plays were by then divided. Once the chorus had arrived they usually remained throughout, their exit marking the end of the play, though occasionally they departed and later returned. In classical tragedy they usually represented a group of persons who had little power over events (such as women, old men, sailors) but who stood to be deeply affected, for good or ill, by the actions of the principal characters. In satyr-drama the chorus

invariably consists of satyrs. In Old Comedy they often had bizarre identities (e.g. clouds, birds, cities) and showed strong partisanship for or against leading characters, as well as addressing the audience on behalf, or in the name, of the author. By Aristotle's time the tragic chorus was tending to degenerate into an 'ineffective lamenter [which] does no more than express sympathy' (*Problems* 922b26–27), and in Menander's comedies the choruses represent mere crowds of drunken revellers, who dance and probably sing between acts, but of whom the characters take no notice except at their first entry; their lyrics, if any, were not included in the published scripts, which merely have the note *chorou* '[performance] of the chorus' at the appropriate points. The chorus of tragedy were at first twelve in number, later fifteen; the chorus of comedy numbered twenty-four; in the Hellenistic period both were drastically cut down. The chorus were led on, and accompanied throughout the performance, by a musician playing on the double reed-pipe (*aulos*, often misleadingly rendered 'flute'). They normally danced in rectangular formation (though some passages clearly require circular or irregular dances), and sang in unison; the tight and sometimes obscure syntax of some choral songs, especially by Sophocles, is evidence that their words must almost always have been distinctly heard, since otherwise they would have been unintelligible to many. A few papyrus fragments of Euripidean choral songs have survived with musical notation. The leader of the chorus (*hēgemōn* or *koryphaios*) had considerable responsibility, in the absence of a conductor, for the moment-to-moment management of

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the chorus in actual performance; he also regularly had a small speaking part (additional to those of the actors proper), though he would hardly ever be assigned a long set speech. Some plays had a second chorus with a different identity, usually appearing only in a single scene; in others the chorus for a longer or shorter period divide into two antagonistic halves (all known examples are in comedy), but apparently always reunite before the end of the play.

2 The actors (Greek *hypokritai*, perhaps originally meaning 'respond-ents', which may refer to their role in the 'epirrhematic' form of dialogue between actor and chorus, common in Aeschylus, in which the chorus sing a series of short stanzas, to each of which the actor responds with a few spoken lines). In early times there was only a single actor; in tragedy Aeschylus is said to have added a second, Sophocles a third (used by Aeschylus in his last years). There seems always to have been a limitation on the number of speaking actors,

doubtless a rule of the competition to ensure a measure of equality between the contestants, but the limit varied from genre to genre and must sometimes have been increased or reduced; there was never any limit on the number of speaking *parts*, which ranges, in surviving plays, from two to twenty-two. All surviving tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides can be performed by three speaking actors; normally the parts are so arranged that each can be played by the same actor throughout, but Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* is an exception. Satyr-plays also regularly require three actors, but one of them always takes the role of Silenus, 'father' of the satyrs; from what survives of Aeschylean satyr-plays it seems likely that in the days of two-actor drama the Silenus part did not count towards the quota of two. In comedy, almost all Aristophanes' surviving plays require four actors (none more); a century later, on the other hand, we find that every play of Menander can be performed by three actors (provided we assume that any role may be split between two or even all three of them), and comic, as well as tragic, companies performing at Delphi in the third century had only three members. From the time when acting became a separate profession, one actor in each play was always regarded as the most important (he was later called the *prōtagōnistēs*, 'first contestant'); in ancient scholarly synopses he is spoken of as having 'acted the play' as if he did it all himself, and he alone was a contender for the acting prize. By the mid-fourth century the actors in a company formed a strict hierarchy, and we find the third (out of three) being called the *tritagōnistēs*. Small singing parts for children were always exempt from any limitation on the number of actors, no doubt because otherwise a dramatist who wanted to use one would

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have been unfairly handicapped, child performers being unable to take adult parts.

3   *Mutes.* Restrictions on the number of actors applied only to those with speaking parts, and author and director were free to populate the acting area with as many non-speaking performers as their artistic discretion, and the purse of the *chorēgos*, would tolerate. In tragedy, persons of high status would normally be accompanied by attendants; in Old Comedy occasions for the employment of mutes are numerous and varied – Aristophanes' *Wasps*, for instance, has non-speaking parts for half a dozen citizens, about the same number of domestic slaves, one nude woman (see below), perhaps six or twelve young boys, one donkey, one dog and its puppies, three dancing crabs and one non-

dancing one, and a collection of kitchen utensils.

All the performers were male. Originally, we are told, the parts they played were all male as well, until the tragedian Phrynichus first introduced female characters and choruses. They wore tight bodysuits over which they put on costumes appropriate to genre and character; actors playing female roles would have their bodysuits suitably padded, as indeed (so vase-paintings and statuettes show us) would many of those playing male roles in comedies and satyr-plays where fatness was considered funny. It has often been doubted whether the naked young females (prostitutes, goddesses or allegorical figures like Treaty and Reconciliation) who appear towards the end of several of Aristophanes' comedies, often being presented as a sort of prize to the chief male character, could really have been nothing more titillating than men dressed up as naked young females; but quite apart from the practical consideration that the weather might be very cold (especially at the Lenaea), artificial has the advantage over natural nudity, in a very large theatre, in that it can be made more easily visible by exaggeration of primary and secondary sexual characteristics. Similarly, even though natural male nudity was an everyday feature of life, only artificial male nudity, in the exaggerated form of the comic or satyric phallus (see pp. 22, 30), was to be found in the theatre.

All actors, chorus members and mutes wore masks – or rather head-pieces, since they covered most of the head and included hair. The mask could tell the audience a good deal about a character's gender, age, social status, sometimes his ethnic origin (an Egyptian would have a dark complexion, a Thracian might have red hair), and possibly his personality (by the Hellenistic period, if not earlier, certain mask-types had acquired strong associations with particular character-types, as happened two millennia later in the Italian *commedia dell'arte*); but its prime function (except in the case of choruses) was simply *to be different* from every other

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mask in the play. Masking made it easy for the same actor to play several different parts, sometimes in interlaced order, without risk of confusion; for a corpse, like that of Ajax, to remain onstage for a long period without immobilizing a live actor (a dummy would be accoutred in the appropriate mask and costume – a severely practical reason for the convention that violent deaths never took place onstage); and, when necessary, for the same part to be taken by different actors in the course of a play. A larger-than-life, boldly coloured mask would also be much easier to see, far back in a large theatre, than a face would be, and would make its wearer easier to distinguish from other characters appearing in the same or in a previous

distinguish from other characters appearing in the same or in a previous scene. In Old Comedy, when a living person, such as Socrates or Euripides, was presented as a character on stage, his mask would at least sometimes be a caricature portrayal of the individual concerned; but the dramatists never seem to have *relied* on such portrait-masks alone to identify the characters for their audiences. The only characters who could sometimes be identified by their appearance alone, without any verbal clues, were the better-known gods and a few heroes, like Heracles, who were traditionally portrayed with very distinctive attributes.

All drama was composed in verse (with a few trivial exceptions in comedy when mock prayers, laws, treaties, etc. were recited in prose), but drama was unique among Greek poetic genres in the enormous variety of verse-forms that it could employ within a single composition.

Common to all forms of drama was the iambic trimeter (a line of three metrical units or *metra* each of the form $\times{-}\cup{-}$) which was the standard verse-form for spoken dialogue (though the detailed rules for its use differed between the genres, and changed somewhat over time).

The *lyric* metres of choral songs were of almost all the major types existing in any form of Greek poetry at the time (and one or two, like the *dochmiac* $\times{-}{-}\times{-}$, typical of highly emotional moments, which hardly existed outside drama). Most choral songs were *strophic*; that is, they consisted of stanzas grouped in pairs, each pair consisting of a *strophe* and an *antistrophe* which were identical (or virtually so) in metre and presumably also in music and choreography. Some strophic songs included occasional unpaired stanzas, usually at the end (and then called *epodes*); some choral (and more solo) songs, especially in the late fifth century, had no strophic structure and are termed *astrophic*.

Intermediate between the spoken iambics and the sung lyrics was a form of delivery called *parakatalogē* ('accompanied recitation') by some ancient writers and 'recitative' by some modern ones; it is not clear whether this would today be classified as a variety of speaking or as a variety of singing, but it was certainly accompanied by the piper and delivered in much stricter rhythm and tempo than were the spoken iambics. This

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form of delivery will here be called 'chant'; it is particularly associated with two metrical patterns, the *anapaestic* (based on *metra* of the form $\cup\cup{-}\cup\cup{-}$ and variants, all giving a 4/4 rhythm) and the *trochaic* (based on *metra* of the form $\cup{-}\cup\times$). Chanted trochaics are almost always *tetrameters* (lines of four, or rather 3¾, *metra*), a metre typical (according to Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449a21–23) of the earliest tragedy and satyr-drama, but frequent in comedy also. Chanted anapaestic tetrameters are found

mainly in comedy, but common in all genres are long continuous runs of anapaestic *metra*, often associated with entries and exits especially of the chorus (and often called 'marching anapaests' by modern scholars). The division between chanted and spoken delivery is usually well marked, though occasionally doubt arises when isolated iambic trimeters appear in a lyric context; the boundary between chant and song is fuzzier, since the chanted line-patterns are combinations of shorter units frequent in song, and (especially in comedy) one type of delivery may pass gradually into the other without any clear break.

TRAGEDY

Tragedy (*tragōidiā*) is a performance by *tragōidoi*, etymologically 'he-goat singers'. It is not known how the performance and the performers came to be so called, and there is no sign that either dramatists or spectators in the fifth and fourth centuries were conscious of the etymology or thought it in any way relevant to their understanding of the genre.

The earliest ideas we can trace about the nature of tragedy seem to conceive it as centred essentially on *suffering*. It is significant that the earliest 'tragic' choruses we know of – the pre-dramatic ones at Sicyon, before their reform by Cleisthenes in the early sixth century – are reported to have 'honoured Adrastus [by singing] about his sufferings'. And the sufferings of great figures of the heroic age remained the staple of tragedy throughout its history.

This simple formula provided tragic dramatists with enormous scope for variety and innovation. There was no significant character in heroic saga who had not undergone suffering and sorrow at some time in his or her life; and there was no obligation on the dramatists to avoid stories already treated by others. On the contrary, they often went back to these – more and more often as judgements came to be formed about which myths were most suitable for tragic treatment and as public familiarity with the vast inherited corpus of story possibly diminished in the fourth century; and when they did so they nearly always altered the story, sometimes in quite fundamental ways, as we can see whenever we are

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able to compare one tragic version of a story with another, or with earlier poetic or artistic representations of the same story. Many myths, whose tragic versions have become so familiar to us that we think of them not just as one variant of the story but as *the* story, probably never existed in

those forms before the tragedians got to work on them. Nobody before Euripides, for example, had thought of Medea as avenging herself on Jason by deliberately killing their children; contrariwise, everybody before Sophocles had thought of Deianeira's killing of her husband Heracles as a wilful murder motivated by jealousy – Sophocles makes it the accidental result of a well-meaning attempt to win back his love by magic, and if anyone murders Heracles in his version it is the long-dead centaur Nessus who lied to Deianeira about the magic ointment.

From this basic fact about dramatists' attitude to myth, there follow three important critical principles. In the first place, it is hardly ever safe to explain any event in a tragedy by saying that it was 'an unalterable part of the saga and [the dramatist] was bound to include it';[4] the words I have quoted were written, by Philip Vellacott,[5] about one of the most famous events in all of Greek legend, 'the self-blinding as the result of the discovery' (by Oedipus that he is guilty of parricide and incest) in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* – forgetting that we happen to know that in the *Oedipus* of Euripides, Oedipus was blinded *forcibly* by the servants of Laius, at a time when he was not yet known to be Laius' son. Secondly, when attempting to reconstruct a lost play, we cannot assume that it contained incidents parallel to those in a surviving play based on the same story; we can, in fact, be virtually certain that there were fundamental differences, though we may not be able to tell what these were. Thirdly, by the same token, we cannot assume that the audience of a tragedy, because they knew 'the myth', knew from the start of the play how it would end. There was no such thing as 'the myth' in the sense of a fixed canonical story; there were only variant versions of it, and all the audience knew for certain was that the variant they were going to see would in at least some ways be entirely new. Even where an event really was unalterable

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4 Aristotle, to be sure, wrote that 'it is not possible to abolish the stories that have been handed down, such as that of Clytaemestra being killed by Orestes or Eriphyle by Alcmeon' (*Poetics* 1453b22–25); but while some mythical data were certainly much less alterable than others, we can never take it for granted that *any* piece of mythical data was absolutely unalterable. In Homer's *Odyssey*, where the revenge of Orestes is a prominent theme, it is never mentioned that he killed Clytaemestra, and the great scholar Aristarchus seriously entertained the possibility that the reader was meant to assume he did not.

5 *Sophocles and Oedipus* (London, 1971), p. 234.

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(or at least was never to our knowledge actually altered), the dramatist might still play with the *possibility* of altering it. This may well happen

might still play with the *possibility* of altering it. This may well happen in Sophocles' *Electra*, where during the first third of the play there is no specific indication that anyone is thinking of killing Clytaemestra, and many spectators may be wondering whether Sophocles is going to create a new version of the myth in which she is not slain by her son but commits suicide; in the middle third it seems increasingly likely that a matricide will indeed be committed – but committed by Electra, a possibility which is forestalled only by the arrival of Orestes on the scene before she is able to take any action.

The horrendous acts of Orestes or of Oedipus are typical instances of a pattern endemic to tragedy. It was already observed by Aristotle (*Poetics* 1453b19–1454a9) that tragedy – in marked contrast to Homeric epic – was particularly fond of situations in which someone either kills, or narrowly avoids killing, a close member of his or her family. This generalization can be extended to two other kinds of death which could in different ways be seen as monstrously unnatural: suicide (which, like the killing of a kinsman, involves shedding one's own blood) and human sacrifice (known in heroic saga, unknown in fifth-century reality). Of twenty-eight surviving fifth-century tragedic dramas, there are twenty-five in which one of these three kinds of death occurs or is narrowly averted. Aristotle's explanation is that incidents of this kind are particularly apt to arouse the tragic emotions of pity and fear; at any rate they become, at the latest with Aeschylus, an all but essential feature of the genre.

The dichotomy just referred to between the *occurrence* and the *narrow avoidance* of a horrific act implies that there could be two basic types of tragedy – or, better, four:

1   A horrific act is performed and leads to, or itself constitutes, a lamentable catastrophe. Many of the most famous tragedies fall into this category, including Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* (the mutual killing of Eteocles and Polyneices), Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (the suicide of Iocaste plus the self-blinding of Oedipus) and *Antigone* (the suicide of Antigone, Haemon and Eurydice, and Haemon's attempt to kill his father), Euripides' *Medea* (Medea's murder of her children), *Hippolytus* (Phaedra's suicide and Theseus' fatal curse on his son) and *Bacchae* (Pentheus torn in pieces by the bacchants led by his mother); it may fairly be called the typical form of tragedy, and as early as 425 BC 'tragic anguish' can mean 'excruciating anguish' (Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 9).

2   A horrific act is performed, but the survivors eventually reach an equilibrium that gives hope for the future. This pattern is particularly

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suited to the broad canvas of the Aeschylean trilogy (see 'Aeschylus', p. 39), and the classic instance of it is the *Oresteia*, where after the murder of Thyestes' children by their uncle, of Agamemnon by his wife, of Clytaemestra by her son, as well as the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, the trilogy culminates in the inauguration at Athens of a new system of justice which acquits Orestes and gives Athens the prospect of future prosperity and glory. Similarly, in the lost ending of Aeschylus' Danaid trilogy the murder by the Danaids of all but one of their bridegrooms almost certainly led eventually, through the intervention of Aphrodite, not to further disaster but to their remarriage and the establishment of a new royal house in Argos from which the great heroes Perseus and Heracles would spring. Later plays belonging to this general type include Sophocles' *Ajax*, which begins with the disgrace and suicide of Ajax but ends with the intervention of Odysseus, once his greatest enemy, to secure his honourable burial, and Euripides' *Madness of Heracles*, where Heracles, having killed his wife and children in a divinely imposed fit of madness, on recovering his sanity rejects suicide and goes with his friend Theseus to rebuild his life.

3 A horrific act is narrowly avoided, and the action ends satisfactorily for everyone (except possibly some clearly villainous character). According to Aristotle (*Poetics* 1453a30–35) this was the most popular form of tragedy in the mid- to late fourth century (and regarded by some of his contemporaries as the best) – and certainly a spectacular example of it, Euripides' *Orestes*, has more known fourth-century revivals than any other fifth-century tragedy. In this play Orestes, Electra and Pylades, who have been sentenced to death for the killing of Clytaemestra, at first are ready to end their own lives as demanded but then murder Orestes' aunt Helen (or so they think), take her daughter Hermione hostage, and threaten to destroy Hermione, themselves and the royal palace by fire – until a *deus ex machina* appears, reveals that Helen is not dead after all, and imposes a solution one of whose terms is that Orestes shall *marry* Hermione! Such plots would today probably be called melodramatic (or even tragicomic) rather than tragic; Aristotle thought their proliferation was encouraged by 'the feebleness of audiences' who found unbearable the deeply disturbing implications of tragedy of type (1). The earliest surviving examples are Euripides' *Ion* and *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, both dating from shortly after 415, but some reconstructible Euripidean plays of earlier date seem to belong to the same type, including *Stheneboea* (early 420s?) and *Cresphontes* (middle 420s?). Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (409), though very different in many ways, may also be assigned to this

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group. One play of the same period, Euripides' *Helen*, hardly even comes near to containing any horrific deaths; all we get is what can be called a token bow to convention when, after Helen and Menelaus have escaped from Egypt, the wicked king Theoclymenus resolves to kill his sister who had helped them, but is baulked first by a heroic slave who is ready to lay down his own life, and then by the intervention of two *dei ex machina*.

4   A horrific act is narrowly avoided, but a lamentable catastrophe ensues nevertheless. In this case the audience is in a sense being double-bluffed: first they expect the horror to occur, then when it fails to occur they expect a non-disturbing ending which in turn does not materialize. The only surviving example of this pattern is Euripides' *Andromache*. A quarrel between Hermione and Andromache (respectively wife and concubine of Neoptolemus) almost leads, in Neoptolemus' absence, to the execution of Andromache and her child by order of Hermione's father Menelaus; the victims are rescued by Neoptolemus' grandfather Peleus, and the shamed Hermione is on the point of suicide – when her ex-fiancé Orestes arrives, she runs off with him, and he arranges for Neoptolemus to be murdered at Delphi.

The plots of tragedies were almost invariably conceived within the framework of heroic saga, the major characters being established figures from the saga cycles, the dramatic action either constituting, or being clearly placed in temporal and causal relation to, well-known incidents in their careers. Two attempts – possibly three – were made to break away from this convention. In 493 Phrynichus dramatized the capture of Miletus by the Persians, which had happened only a few months previously (and which many Athenians believed they could have prevented had they sent help to the Milesians when asked); afterwards he was fined ('because he had reminded the Athenians of their own troubles', according to Herodotus 6.21.2) and future productions of the play were banned. Seven years later the introduction of comedy to the City Dionysia provided a more suitable vehicle for a drama that commented directly on current affairs.

A more successful, but in its nature temporary, flowering of tragedy on contemporary themes came in the aftermath of the Persian Wars. The day of Marathon, the months from Thermopylae to Plataea, were among the rare occasions when history, as it were, rises to the stature of legend, when men feel that they are performing and witnessing deeds that deserve to rank with those of the age of heroes. Since, however, tragedy was a genre that told of suffering rather than of triumph, both the tragic productions that we know of on the Persian Wars – that by Phrynichus, probably in

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476, and the surviving *Persians* of Aeschylus in 472 – presented the war not as an Athenian or Greek victory, but as a Persian or Asian disaster. There was never another such moment in ancient Greek history, and contemporary tragedy was never tried again, though in the early Hellenistic period some tragedies were written around figures of the historical past such as Themistocles or Gyges of Lydia.

The third breakaway was, or may have been, attempted by Euripides' younger contemporary Agathon when he wrote a play, probably called *Antheus*, whose plot and characters were entirely invented. At least such is the assertion of Aristotle (*Poetics* 1451b21–23), who implies that this was not the only play of its kind; but there is some evidence that the stories of these plays were not fictions, but obscure, perhaps local myths known to very few people. At any rate, if there were indeed tragedies of this kind they remained very rare, and we can identify no other example.

The basic structural rhythm of all forms of Greek drama was an alternation between scenes of spoken dialogue by actors (or by an actor and the chorus leader) and songs by the chorus, often but not always when no one else is on the scene. Traditionally this alternation is described in terms to be found in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1452b15–25). The first choral song is called the *parodos* ('arrival'), and subsequent ones *stasima* ('standing songs', i.e. songs sung after the chorus had stationed itself in the *orchēstrā*); the spoken scene which in most plays precedes the entry of the chorus is the *prologos* (prologue), and spoken scenes between choral songs are *epeisodia* ('additional entrances', i.e. scenes marked off by the entrance of actors in addition to the chorus); the term *exodos* ('exit') denotes all that part of the play that follows the last full choral song. Another term in this tradition is *kommos* (literally 'lament'), defined in the *Poetics* as a 'lament uttered jointly by the chorus and from the *skēnē*', but used more broadly by more recent critics to denote any lyric or mainly lyric passage in which both chorus and actor(s) participate (a modern alternative is *amoibaion*, 'exchange'). This terminology is unsatisfactory but is still widely used, especially to refer to choral songs; it does not provide an entirely adequate account of the structure of every play, but neither do any of the alternative patterns of analysis which have been developed in modern times. An important omission is the solo song by an actor, or *monody*, typical especially of late fifth-century tragedy, which may effectively take the place of a choral song; in this period it also becomes common for the *parodos* to take the form of a lyric dialogue between the chorus and one or more principals. Other important recurring structural elements include the *epirrhematic exchange* (see p. 12), which after Aeschylus tends to be replaced by less rigidly constructed *amoibaia*; the *rhesis*, or long set speech by a single character, a subtype of which is the *messenger-speech* narrating to

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characters and audience events that have taken place 'offstage'; the *agon* or debate between two characters, including normally a *rhesis* by each (an occasional option in Aeschylus and Sophocles; Euripides has one in almost every play); *stichomythia* ('line-talk'), a highly stylized form of dialogue in which each speech consists of exactly one single line (with a variant, *distichomythia*, in which speeches are of two lines); and *antilabe* ('take-over'), in which, contrary to normal tragic practice, one speaker interrupts or answers another in the middle of a line (usually at moments of heightened tension).

Tragedy rigidly upheld the convention (sometimes, rather misleadingly, called the 'dramatic illusion') that the words and actions of the *dramatis personae* must be appropriate to their fictive situation and must show no awareness of the occasion of performance or of the presence of spectators. This convention can occasionally be stretched, as towards the end of the *Oresteia* when much that is said, though formally of timeless significance, very obviously addresses Athenian concerns of 458 BC, and Athena explicitly addresses one speech (*Eumenides*, lines 681–708) to 'my citizens for the future'; but it is never actually broken. Consequently, once the brief post-Persian Wars period ended, it was impossible for tragedy to deal directly with specific political issues in the narrow sense; reference to current affairs has to be made, if at all, by way of generalization, prophecy or oblique allusion. Fifth-century tragedy is, however, constantly concerned with issues that are political in the broader sense that they are vital to the lives of humans in a *polis* society (often in any society) – among many others, the relations of men and women and the nature and responsibilities of marriage; the problems an exceptional leader and an egalitarian community may have with one another; the extent to which the *polis* is entitled to override traditional family and other loyalties; the justification, ethical or pragmatic, of a ruthless *Realpolitik*, or of the traditional rule 'help your friends and harm your enemies'; the treatment of defeated enemies; the social repercussions of the ethical teaching of the sophists, or of the rise of new, often exotic religious cults. And beyond this, tragedy just as constantly explored the contradictions inherent in the human condition itself; portraying as it often did events of almost inconceivable horror, it posed questions about the nature of a world in which such things can happen, and of the gods who control that world. Each of the great dramatists gives a different response to these questions ('response' rather than 'answer', because 'answer' might suggest that the problems have been solved). By and large, Aeschylus' response is that the worst evils in the world are caused by wilful human action, which

the worst evils in the world are caused by wilful human action, which often has effects spreading far beyond the harm originally intended by the perpetrator. Sophocles encourages us to perceive an overall pattern and

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logic in the universe that has, one might say, a kind of terrible beauty about it even if it cannot satisfy the demands of our moral sense, while at the same time he also makes us feel that sometimes a human *refusal* to conform meekly to this logic, ultimately futile as it may be, is neverthe-less a mark of greatness. Euripides, in his tragic (as distinct from his melodramatic) plays, is the bleakest of the three, seeing in the evils of our existence no logic but only caprice; but frequently crushing and undeserved disaster is made a little more bearable by human love, whether among family (e.g. the final reconciliation between Theseus and Hippolytus) or between friends (e.g. Heracles, Theseus and Heracles' foster-father Amphitryon at the end of *The Madness of Heracles*).

SATYR-DRAMA

Satyrs (*satyroi*), also called silens (*silēnoi*), were a class of male beings of popular belief who notably failed to fit into the usual tripartite classi-fication of the animate world into gods, humans and beasts. They were followers and servants of Dionysus, they engaged at every opportunity in the amorous pursuit of the minor goddesses known as nymphs, and they do not appear to have been thought of as mortal – but they were not gods, and were not worshipped. Their appearance was imagined as in most respects human – but they were less than fully human, for they lacked all moral sense and all higher spiritual qualities, knew nothing of society, property, family or work, and lived in the wilds. They were beastlike in certain aspects, notably (in the archaic and classical periods) in possessing a horse's tail and in their uncontrolled lust (symbolized by their out-size, permanently erect phallus) – but they could at least sometimes be imagined as possessing a human and even superhuman cleverness.

Satyrs seem to have been early associated with ritual and festal dressing-up and masquerade, especially on Dionysiac occasions; it is thus not surprising that once a masked and costumed Dionysiac drama became established, there soon arose a variety of it in which satyrs played a central role. Its creator is said to have been Pratinas of Phlius (see pp. 2, 60), and artistic evidence suggests that the genre reached Athens around, or shortly before, 520. We do not know what official place satyr-drama had in the City Dionysia, in these early days; but at least from the start of Aeschylus'

career *c*.499, it had been wholly incorporated into the tragic competition. Each contestant was required to produce three tragedies and one satyr-play; we can safely assume that the same chorus, actors and piper performed all four plays. In general this pattern continued throughout the fifth century, though at least once a dramatist was allowed to present

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a light tragedy (Euripides' *Alcestis*, 438) in lieu of a satyr-play. When the three tragedies had formed a connected 'trilogy' presenting episodes of a single story, the satyr-play often dramatized another episode of the same story, though not necessarily continuing sequentially on from the three tragedies: Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (murder of Agamemnon, revenge taken by his son Orestes, Orestes' flight and eventual acquittal at Athens) was followed by the satyr-play *Proteus* (adventures of Agamemnon's brother Menelaus in Egypt), while his Theban trilogy (*Laius*, *Oedipus*, *Seven against Thebes*) was followed by *The Sphinx* whose story fell, in the sequence of the legend, between those of *Laius* and of *Oedipus*.

This is the only known ancient Greek poetic/musical competition in which entrants were required to make presentations in two different genres. It is possible that the linking of the two was due to a feeling that tragedy, whatever its origins, was now usually 'nothing to do with Dionysus', and that a performance in honour of this god ought to contain at least one component that was more clearly associated with him; but this cannot be the whole story for, as *Alcestis* shows, the inclusion of a satyr-play was not in any sense a religious obligation, and the practice could not have lasted as long as it did had not the leading dramatists found it suited them artistically and/or appealed strongly to their audiences.

There were more senses than one in which tragedy had come to be 'nothing to do with Dionysus'. Not only did it usually enact stories in which Dionysus was not involved, but more importantly these stories, especially as they were treated in tragedy, were prima facie highly unsuitable for a festival in honour of a god associated more than any other with joyful celebration. The satyrs were beings whose sole aim in life was pleasure, and a play about their doings formed an appropriate transition from the grim spectacles of tragedy back to the festive mood. It is probably significant that a very common pattern in satyr-drama is the *return* of the satyrs from an abnormal activity to their normal role as revellers attendant on Dionysus.

The recipe for making a satyr-play, in the fifth century, was this. Take a suitable episode from myth. Ensure that it has, or can be made to have, a happy ending (for those characters who have engaged the audience's

sympathy; not necessarily for the satyrs). Ensure that it contains some of the following ingredients, and if not, mix some in: sex, babies, resurrection, athletics, new inventions or discoveries, and an ultimately abortive attempt by the satyrs to follow a new and unaccustomed occupation, or by someone else to make them do so. Stir in a chorus of satyrs, together with their 'father', Silenus, who is an obligatory character in every satyr-play. He may originally have been the leader of the chorus, but by Sophocles' time he was a distinct character played by one of the actors.

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Stew the whole mixture together, allowing the satyrs to impart a farcical, selfish, amoral flavour to the dish, and serve as dessert to the tragic banquet.

Until the twentieth century only one satyr-play, Euripides' *Cyclops*, was known by anything more than references and short quotations in other ancient writings; it had survived by the accident of the alphabetical position of its title (see p. 4). Papyrus discoveries have enabled us to get some idea of what satyr-drama may have been like in the hands of Aeschylus and Sophocles, though none of the rediscovered texts is anything like complete.

One of these rediscovered plays, Sophocles' *The Trackers* (*Ichneutai*), contains within its preserved portions almost all the typical ingredients of satyr-drama. It is written around the birth-legend of the god Hermes, who on the first day of his life invented the lyre, stole Apollo's cattle, and avoided Apollo's vengeance by making a gift of the lyre to him. The scene is Hermes' birthplace, Mount Cyllene in Arcadia. Our text begins with Apollo proclaiming a reward to whoever helps him find his lost cattle. Silenus, on behalf of the satyrs, offers to do so, and Apollo promises them gold and freedom. The satyrs search like hounds (or, as Silenus puts it, they crawl around on their stomachs like hedgehogs), and quickly find tell-tale hoofprints – but soon they are terrified out of their wits by a mysterious noise. Their own loud cries and foot-stamping dances presently bring the local nymph, Cyllene, out of her cave. She asks them why they have 'changed from the toil with which you used to gratify your master' (Dionysus), and is clearly afraid that they have come to rape her; they assure her that all they want is an explanation of the noise, and she tells them about the birth of Hermes and how he made a lyre out of a tortoise-shell (this takes some explaining as the satyrs do not know what a tortoise is); that is what is making the noise. The satyrs are now certain that Hermes is the cattle-thief (because Cyllene has told them that cows' leather was used in the making of the lyre), but Cyllene refuses to believe them (not least because she herself is currently nursing Hermes on behalf

them (not least because she herself is currently nursing Hermes on behalf of his mother Maia). This is as far as the papyrus intelligibly takes us, though some later scraps indicate (as we might anyway have expected) that Apollo appeared again; very likely the climax of the play was the appearance of Hermes (full-grown at the age of six days) and his presentation of the lyre to Apollo, who may have made beautiful music with it immediately; the satyrs may have claimed their reward, but they certainly will not have got the gold, and probably not their freedom either.

The costume of dramatic satyrs is well known from art. It had three constant elements: short breeches (sometimes hairy, sometimes smooth) worn over the usual theatrical bodysuit; a horse's tail; and a large, erect

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phallus pointing upwards at 45 degrees or so. The masks tend to have black beards, bald and rather domed foreheads, pointy ears, and diminutive snub noses – the last three all regarded as ugly features. Silenus, being the satyrs' father, has a similar but much older-looking mask with a white beard. The dramatic and poetic structure of satyr-drama was broadly similar to that of tragedy, but the lyrics were usually much shorter and rhythmically simpler, and an entire play would often be little more than half the length of an average tragedy.

The language of satyr-drama see-saws between a level close to that of tragedy and one permitting reference to undignified animals and objects and (usually in euphemistic or metaphorical terms) to sexual and excretory activities, and the use of word-types (especially diminutives) not found in tragedy; there is some tendency for these low-register linguistic features to be put in the mouths of the satyrs rather than of 'heroic' characters like Odysseus.

Satyr-drama continued to be written and performed as long as tragedy and comedy did, and Horace in the *Ars Poetica* has much to say about it (lines 220–250); but from the fourth century onwards it seems to have lost its close association with tragedy. Fragments of satyr-plays from the 330s and 320s suggest that it had acquired features of Old Comedy such as personal satire and explicit recognition of its own status as a performance; by that time, too, satyr-plays were no longer part of entries for the tragic competition. For a time at the City Dionysia only one satyr-play was performed, as an *hors d'oeuvre* to the major dramatic competitions; but from the mid-third century, both at Athens and elsewhere, the normal practice was to have separate competitions in tragedy, satyr-drama and comedy, sometimes with the same dramatists presenting all three.

OLD COMEDY

Comedy (*kōmōidiā*) is etymologically the song of a *kōmos*, a rowdy, drunken band of revellers moving unsteadily and noisily through the streets, singing as they go, in search of a symposium into which they can burst uninvited. It is easy to believe that from early times the songs of some *kōmoi* tended towards insult, abuse and satire, and it may have been this tradition that took formal poetic shape in the iambic insult-poetry of Archilochus and Hipponax in the northern and eastern Aegean; in recent years there has been increasing recognition of the influence of this genre on Old Comedy. At Athens informal insult-songs had a recognized place in the celebration of the Eleusinian Mysteries; it is possible that in the late sixth and early fifth centuries this 'iambic' tradition was blending with the Dionysiac

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tradition of the mimetic chorus and producing, on the fringes of the City Dionysia, unofficial quasi-dramatic performances which were becoming a regular feature of the occasion. At any rate, in 487/6 a competition in *kōmōidiā* became part of the official programme of the festival. This was the only wholly new poetic contest that we know to have been introduced at the City Dionysia in the two centuries between its reorganization near the end of the sixth century (see p. 2) and the end of the great age of Athenian drama *c.*263. Its introduction may have been a political move, designed – like the start of a series of annual ostracism votes, and the substitution of lottery for election in the choice of the principal magistrates, both in 487 – to limit the power of the interrelated elite family groups who had always dominated Athenian public life, and if so it is likely to have been Themistocles who proposed or at least inspired it: comic drama was given official status as a weapon of left-wing[6] political agitation.

It may, however, have lost this role before long: Magnes, the leading comic dramatist of the 470s and 460s, seems to have been remembered mainly for his music and his farmyard imitations (see Aristophanes, *Knights*, lines 520–525). One suspects that comedy was in the doldrums. Its original *raison d'être* had disappeared with the Persian Wars, the end of the factional struggles of the 480s, new political alignments, and finally the ostracism of Themistocles in the late 470s, and it seems not to have found a new one; Magnes reigned unchallenged because no poet of high quality was interested in comedy, and the genre seemed likely to degenerate into a downmarket form of entertainment mainly of interest to children.

In the 450s something changes. Within a few years several new names

appear, most notably that of Cratinus, and so do new themes: we can detect a blending of the Athenian comic tradition established by Magnes with the rediscovered tradition of satire and invective in iambic verse, and, most significantly, with the tradition of comic drama that had grown up, more or less independently, in Sicily.

The outstanding figure in this Sicilian tradition had been Epicharmus. Despite significant papyrus discoveries, we know little about the structure of his plays (we do not even know for sure whether they had a chorus); but we know on the one hand that they sometimes made explicit reference to contemporary persons or events, on the other that a large proportion

6 By a 'left-winger', in relation to ancient Athens, I mean one who favoured the active use of the power of the state to reduce or eliminate privilege and inequality among its adult male citizens, and by a 'right-winger' one who favoured the active use of the power of the state to maintain or extend such privilege and inequality.

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of them were burlesques of episodes from myth. Turns of phrase and types of plot (such as conflicts between a hero and a monster, e.g. Heracles and Pholus, Odysseus and the Cyclops) pass from Epicharmus to Cratinus and, later, Aristophanes. It is likely that Old Comedy owes to Sicilian comedy the strong vein of fantasy that runs through it, enabling its characters to achieve the impossible with ease and often without even requiring divine assistance.

The iambic tradition encouraged Athenian dramatists to revive the practice of direct, often vicious personal attacks on prominent contemporary individuals. And, at the latest in the 440s when our textual material becomes slightly less scanty and we are able to assign approximate dates to plays, we can see a strong selectivity in the individuals chosen for attack. The political stance of comedy has been reversed. From now till 404, at least, comedy belongs politically to the Right – attacking Pericles and those of his successors who relied mainly on the support of the poor, but being comparatively soft on their opponents who are occasionally sympathized with or even praised; ridiculing such democratic practices as the payment of jurors; urging their audiences (when at all possible) to understand the Spartan point of view. Either comedy was now attracting highly educated (and therefore wealthy) poets who thought right-wing thoughts because that was natural in their social milieu, or the dramatists were accommodating to an audience that was more right-wing than formerly because the entrance fee had been increased, or (likely enough) both factors were at work. In 440/39 an attempt was made to draw

comedy's political teeth, when an Assembly decree prohibited the slander in comedy of named individuals; the next couple of years may have been a fruitful period in the development of new styles in comic drama that were to have a long life and eventually, in modified forms, to take over entirely, but the decree was repealed in 437/6, at a time when Pericles was under strong political pressure. Later some politicians, notably Cleon between 426 and 423, tried to intimidate comic dramatists by prosecuting them under the general law, but with no success. In practice the Athenian comic dramatist, like the Athenian politician himself, had total freedom of speech.

At any rate, by the 440s Old Comedy has taken shape, a shape which remains recognizable for about half a century before gradually disintegrating. It has three fundamental characteristics that remain typical of Athenian comedy in all its subsequent developments. One is that in comedy, as in satyr-drama, there may be no profound disasters (though deplorable characters like *sykophantai* [informers] may be punished by a symbolic or even, very occasionally, an actual death). A second, which also links comedy with satyr-drama, is that the ethos of comedy is strongly

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Dionysiac; but whereas the satyrs seek Dionysiac fulfilment purely for themselves, even father and children being ready to betray each other, the ideal world of comedy is a world in which people seek pleasure for themselves *and others*, as inclusively as possible. Those who deny pleasure to others,[7] or try to monopolize it at others' expense, are enemies of the comic spirit, and must be either converted or suppressed.

The third key characteristic of comedy, which separates it from both the other dramatic genres, is that comedy *exists in present time*. The action of tragedy, after 472, always takes place entirely within a fictive setting in the heroic age; so too does the action of satyr-drama. The characters of comedy, on the other hand, even when they are enacting tales of heroic myth (as they often were), never wholly forget that they are also Athenians taking part in a performance, and that they and their audiences will soon be stepping back into a real world; and they are always free to address the audience as an audience, to refer to themselves as actors in a theatre, and to mention persons and events known to the audience regardless of whether they, the fictive characters, could possibly have known of them; frequently a dialogue will zigzag bewilderingly back and forth between language appropriate to the fictive and to the theatrical setting.

Old Comedy comprised several well-marked subgenres. One of the most important, though no complete example of it survives, was that of

mythological burlesque. For one play of this type, Cratinus' *Dionysus as Paris* (*Dionysalexandros*), a papyrus gives us the greater part of a synopsis of the plot. The play (produced in 430 BC, in the first year of the Peloponnesian War) was based on the legend of the Judgement of Paris, but the role of Paris was largely usurped by Dionysus. Apparently Dionysus, escorted by the satyrs (who form the chorus), had arrived at Paris' rustic abode on Mount Ida and taken possession of it in Paris' temporary absence, Dionysus disguising himself as Paris; presumably Dionysus had heard that the three goddesses Hera, Athena and Aphrodite were coming to have Paris judge which of them was the most beautiful, and he and the satyrs wanted to put themselves in the way of any inducements (especially sexual ones) that they might offer. When our text of the papyrus synopsis begins, Hermes has just asked Dionysus–Paris to act as judge and is going off to summon the contestants. After an interlude during which the chorus 'talk to the audience . . . and make fun of Dionysus when he appears', the contest itself is staged, and Dionysus declares Aphrodite the winner after she has offered him 'stunning good

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7 Or, *a fortiori*, actually do them harm (e.g. *sykophantai*, crooked politicians, excruciatingly bad poets and musicians, etc.).

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looks and sex-appeal'. He then 'sails to Sparta, takes Helen away and returns to Ida'; presumably the time required for this to take place is covered by a choral interlude (there are parallels for this elsewhere in Old Comedy). Hearing that the Greeks are ravaging the country and demanding the surrender of Paris, Dionysus 'conceals Helen in a basket and turns himself into a ram' to await developments; but the real Paris now comes home, discovers them, and orders them both to be handed over to the Greeks. This, of course, threatens (so to speak) to prevent the Trojan War from taking place, but this mythological catastrophe is averted by Helen, who, fearing punishment for her adultery, begs to be allowed to stay, and Paris agrees to make her his wife; Dionysus he sends off to be handed over, accompanied by his ever-loyal satyrs. The play ends there. It has made fun of Dionysus, as did Aristophanes' *Frogs* and several other comedies, presenting him as selfish, lustful and cowardly. It has ingeniously reversed the traditional assumptions of the story: Paris and the Trojans are innocent of everything except taking pity on a woman in distress. But in contrast with the satyr-plays, which in some respects it so much resembles, it has also been commenting on contemporary

Athenian affairs: the papyrus synopsis states quite specifically that the play satirized Pericles 'for having brought the war upon the Athenians', and its evidence is confirmed by a quoted fragment of a play by another dramatist, Hermippus (fr. 47), in which Pericles is apostrophized as 'king of the satyrs' – though we do not know precisely *how* it was made clear that Dionysus represented Pericles (perhaps, it has recently been suggested, it was done by giving him a mask/headpiece caricaturing the unusual shape of Pericles' cranium).

Another type of comedy, possibly stimulated by the repressive legislation of the early 430s, largely abandoned political topicality and concentrated on the world of the symposium and the *hetaira* (courtesan); one might call this the comedy of night-life. The leading figures in this development were Crates, a contemporary of Cratinus, and the somewhat younger Pherecrates. The surviving fragments of Crates include not one reference to any living contemporary, and food, drink and symposiac games are prominent themes. Pherecrates' fragments show his output to have been more varied, but at least three of his plays were actually named after *hetairai* and probably featured them as central characters. A fragment of *Corianno* (Pherecrates, fr. 77) clearly shows that we are here in the early stages of the development of the love-plots typical of New Comedy: a young man is telling an old one that 'it is natural for me to be in love right now, but *you* aren't in season for it any more', and it is plausible to suppose that the two are rivals for Corianno's affections. It was some time before this variety of comedy caught on again, but its influence can be

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seen in, for example, the scene in Aristophanes' *Wasps* where old Philocleon abducts a slave-*hetaira* from a symposium and vainly resists his son's attempt to take her away from him.

For the third major variety of Old Comic plot structure – the plot of predicament and rescue, found in all the surviving plays of Aristophanes – see pp. 67–8, where the formal structure and the social and intellectual attitudes of Old Comedy, as exemplified by Aristophanes, are also discussed.

The costume of Old Comedy appears to have been based on that of ordinary life (except of course for the numerous divine or fantastic characters), but most male characters had their garments cut short to reveal a large artificial phallus. In contrast with the satyric phallus, this was not normally shown erect except where there was dramatic significance to showing it thus; sometimes it was allowed to hang limp and loose, very often it was coiled into a loop and tied up to itself. Where convenient it could be concealed by outer garments of suitable length – an option

could be concealed by outer garments of suitable length – an option
of great importance in plays like *Women at the Thesmophoria* and *The
Assemblywomen*, in which men disguise themselves as women or vice versa.
For other physical aspects of Old Comic production see pp. 9–14.

MIDDLE AND NEW COMEDY

Beginning in the early fourth century, comedy moved fairly rapidly away
from the public and political themes of Aristophanes' time; Aristophanes
himself, and his contemporary Plato,[8] joined in this movement in their
later plays. Ancient scholars conjectured that comic satire had again been
restricted by legislation, or (contrary to clear contemporary evidence) that
the institution of *chorēgoi* had been abolished so that comic choruses could
no longer be properly trained; a more probable explanation, supported
by a wealth of artistic evidence (mainly from southern Italy) and confirmed
by the vast increase in dramatists' productivity from *c.*380 onwards, is
that Athenian comedy, like Athenian tragedy, was now being composed
with an eye to foreign as well as Athenian audiences. Whether a play was
to be given its first production abroad, or whether it was to be produced
first at Athens and taken abroad later, the dramatist could not afford to
build it around issues and personalities that would mean nothing to its
audience.

8 Not to be confused with the famous philosopher of the same name.

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In this period, therefore, while themes of civic concern were not wholly
abandoned, varieties of comedy that had been somewhat in the
background in the late fifth century – the mythological burlesque, the
comedy of night-life, and increasingly also the comedy of love-intrigue
– came to the fore; it seems fairly certain, for example, that such stock
character-types of later comedy as the cook, the parasite and the pimp
were largely developed in the middle decades of the fourth century. The
term 'Middle Comedy' is often applied to comedy of the period beginning,
at latest, with the death or retirement of Aristophanes *c.*385 BC, and
ending with the debut of Menander *c.*321. Such a division of a genre into
periods is bound to be somewhat artificial; in particular, it is clear that
the style we know as New Comedy was already fully established, not
only by 321 but several years earlier when Aristotle was writing the *Poetics*,

and H.G. Nesselrath, author of the standard study of Middle Comedy, allows it only one generation of relative stability (380–350) before it begins to metamorphose into New Comedy. It is significant that one source (the Suda lexicon) credits Anaxandrides – whose career coincides almost exactly with the central period of Middle Comedy – with being the first to introduce 'love affairs and the rape of virgins' into (non-mythological) comedy. This drama of love-intrigue, traces of which in Old Comedy are fairly exiguous, probably derived partly from the prominence of *hetairai* in some symposium-centred plays, partly from mythological dramas, especially those which (on the model of certain tragedies by Euripides and others) centred on the consequences of the many rapes and seductions perpetrated in myth by gods; indeed the ancient biography of Aristophanes ascribes to *him*, in his last two plays (both with plots based on myth, and both produced by his son Araros), the introduction into comedy of 'rape and recognition, and all the other things that Menander imitated'.

The evidence for Middle Comedy is inferior both in quantity and in quality to that for Old or New Comedy. No dramatist of this period was admitted to the canon of outstanding poets; papyrus fragments are very scanty and hard to identify; and a high proportion of ancient quotations come from a single author, Athenaeus, who has a very strong bias towards passages that bear on the world of the symposium.

Until 1844, Greek New Comedy was known only from ancient quotations (many of them ethical and sententious) and from the Roman adaptations of Plautus and Terence. In that year the first fragments of actual texts of Menander were found in St Catherine's monastery at Mount Sinai, sewn into the binding of another book; they were not even partially published until 1876, and made little impact. Papyrus fragments began to appear from 1898, but the true modern rebirth of Menander occurred

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in 1907, with the publication of a fifth-century codex ('the Cairo codex') whose preserved portions include parts of five plays; it was now possible to read whole scenes and sequences of scenes, and to get a fair idea of the plot of two or three entire plays. Of subsequent discoveries the most spectacular has been that of a codex of the third or fourth century, now in the Bodmer collection at Geneva, from which between 1958 and 1969 were published virtually the whole of *The Curmudgeon* and substantial parts of two other plays. Today we have significant papyrus evidence for about twenty of Menander's 108 plays, and at least seven are well enough preserved to make it possible to study them effectively as whole (if

sometimes gappy) dramas. In addition there are sixty or seventy papyrus fragments whose style shows them to come from New Comedy, but whose authorship is at present unknown; most of these are likely to be by Menander also, but some may well be from plays by Philemon, Diphilus and others.

The typical plot patterns, character types and formal features of New Comedy are described in Chapter 2 (see pp. 72–5). Menander and his contemporaries gave the genre its definitive shape, which seems to have changed little as long as comedies continued to be written: one of the very few fragments of late Hellenistic comedy, by Athenion (mid-first century BC?), presents us with a boastful cook who could have stepped straight out of a comedy of 250 years earlier, dilating on the role of cooks in creating human civilization as we know it.

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